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To Use or Not To Use Arabic in English Language Teaching

استعمال أو عدم استعمال العربية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية

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Abstract

This paper discusses one of the most controversial issues in English language teaching, namely, the use of L1, in this case, Arabic, in teaching English as a foreign language. It first reviews the role of L1 in some major language teaching methods. The paper then presents the rationale for using L1 in English language teaching. This includes motivation, psychological effects, and the influence of L1 on second language acquisition. The paper concludes by presenting empirical evidence from a field study conducted by Tushyeh (1990) in which Arab teachers of English indicate the extent to which they use L1, Arabic, in teaching English as a foreign language.

تناقش هذه الورقة إحدى المسائل المثيرة للجدل في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية وبالذات استخدام اللغة الأم، وفي هذه الحالة العربية، في تدريس الإنجليزية، كلغة أجنبية. في البداية تستعرض الورقة دور اللغة الأولى في بعض الأساليب الرئيسية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، وبعد ذلك تقدم الورقة الأساس المنطقي لاستخدام الأولى في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية.

ويشمل ذلك الدافعية والآثار النفسية وتأثير اللغة الأولى على اكتساب اللغة الثانية.

وتلخص الورقة بعض أدلة تجريبية عن دراسة ميدانية أجراها طشية (١٩٩٠) والتي أشار فيـــها أساتذة الإنجليزية من العرب إلى الحد الذي يذهبون به في استخدامهم للغة الأمم "العربية" في تدريـــس الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

I. Introduction

One of the hotly debated issues in the field of teaching English as asecond or foreign language today in the Arab world is whether Arabic has a role in teaching English or not. While some teachers of English are not abashed in using Arabic in teaching English, the use of Arabicis anathema to other teachers of English. The aim of this paper is to seek a middle ground solution to this perennial issue in English language teaching. It begins with a review of the role of the first language or mother tongue in major English language teaching methods. It then moves to reasons for using the first language, in this case, Arabic in English language teaching. Finally the paper presents the views of Arab teachers of English on the use of Arabic in English language teaching.

II. The use of the First Language in Major ELT Methodologies

A. The Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method is the oldest language teachingmethod. It is still used, though not extensively, till today. As the name implies, this method relies heavily on translating to the learner's first language and the memorization of grammatical rules. Translation of sentences and selected paragraphs is an essential part of the Grammar-Translation Method. Translation is based upon the grammar rules which the learner had studied. A typical procedure of the Grammar-Translation Method is described by Lado (1964:92):

"In the Grammar-Translation Method, the book begins with the parts of speech, declensions, conjugations, rules, and exceptions. Often each unit has a

paragraph which will be translated into the native language. These paragraphs illustrate the grammar rules studied in the unit. The student is expected to apply the rules on his own. This involves a complicated mental manipulation of the conjugation and declension in the order memorized, down to the form that might fit the translation."

B. The Direct Method

The Direct Method arose in the early twentieth century as a reaction against the Grammar-Translation Method. This method emphasizes language learning by direct contact with the foreign language in meaningful situations. The central idea of the Direct Method is the association of words and sentences with their meaning through demonstration, dramatizing, painting, etc. (Lado,1994). The Direct Method with its use of language in meaningful situations, e.g. dramas, pictures, tapes, posters, associations etc. almost eliminated the use of translation in language learning.

In spite of this ban on translation, there was a limited use oftranslation, especially with the development of the principles of the Direct Method. Mackey (1967:146) indicates that: "As the principles of the Direct Method spread, there was more and more compromise with them in order to meet the growing demands for measurable standards of accuracy. Vocabulary exercises and systematic grammar drills were added and a more advanced level of translation was included".

C. The Audio-Lingual Method

As a result of the expansion in foreign language use and the growing contact between various peoples in the 1930s, and the 1940s, the Audio-Lingual Method appeared. It is the new scientific oral method that was developed to replace the Grammar- Translation Method. It had begun to gain favor in teaching English as a second/foreign lnaguage in the 1950s. This method, however, was blamed for not developing the ability to carry on spontaneous conversations, a goal it had not originally recognized (Spolsky,1989).

Proponents of the Audio-Lingual Method are unanimously against the use of translation in the early stages of language learning. Brooks (1964) argues that it is futile to try to translate from one language into another until one knows a good deal about both. He further says: *"Translation meaning restating in code B what has already been stated in code A, has no place in the early levels of language learning. Two languages are neither thought nor spoken simultaneously and the process of matching one with another is in fact destructive as the control of both"* (p: 255).

D. The Communicative Approach

The most popular language teaching approach today which is heavily advocated is the Communicative Approach. It has its roots in Chomsky's refutation of Skinner's verbal behavior. Chomsky (1965) emphasized the creative aspect of linguistic knowledge and viewed language learning as a process of acquiring conscious control of the phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns of language. The Communicative Approach began to spread in the 1970s, and the 1980s with the work of Savignon (1972) Munby (1978), Widdowson (1978), Brumfit (1985), and Candlin (1986) tomention a few of the proponents of this approach.

The Communicative Approach emphasizes language learning through interaction, language use not usage, peer and group activities, and learning both the grammatical forms and their functions. That is why this approach is called in Europe the functional-notional approach.

The Communicative Approach has lifted the ban on the use of the first language. It calls for a judicious use of the first language in second/foreign language learning. Hastings (1997) indicates that the first language is viewed as a tool which should be used wisely. The first language is also used to check the students' understand- ing of the second/foreign language. He argues that the use of the first language is a natural thing. The student's mother tongue is the backbone to the target language.

III Reasons for Using Arabic in ELT

From the rapid review of some major language teaching methods prsented in the previous section, it was seen that the use of the first language or translatiion was discredited in the earlier methods. In recent years wiht the advent of the Communicative Approach there is a justification for the limited use of the first language. In this section, some reasons, namely, motivation, psychological effects, and the influence of the first language or second language aquisition, will be discussed.

A. Motivation:

When a learner first steps into a language classroom, he/she brings his/her motivation, whether integrative or instrumental, or both. (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Once learning has started, things are not so easy to differentiate. His/her first achievement may enhance his/her motivation which, in turn, will urge the learner to give more priority, time and effort to his/her learning and to gain further achievement, thus forming an ideal circle.

On the other hand, a vicious circle is also equally possible. Whenlearners, especially adults, begin to attend a language class, they bring not only motivation, but also some anxiety. L2 is somehting unfamiliar to them and they are not sure whether they will succeed or fail in commanding it. For beginners, the first few classes are crucial: they should be a little challenging but, definitely, not threatening.

The crux here is how to stimulate and sustain the learners'motivation. To achieve this, the teacher should present what the learner "is ready to learn (i.e., what he is capable of learning, not necessarily what he wants to learn". (Claxton, 1984:2-15). Then the question is: are beginners capable of learning L2 through L2 only? Maybe some are, but many are not. In the learning of English as a second language, e.g., an Arab learner in the U.S.A., most of the learners, whether they are capable or not, will go on learning because they have immediate use of L2, in this case English in the U.S.A. In settings where

English is a foreign language, as is the case in all Arab countries, things are quite different. Many of those who are not capable may gradually give up or simply drop out as they can live quite happily in their society without L2. Besides, it is very difficult to bridge the gap between their limited ability to communicate in L2 and the ideas they want to express if the class is conducted completely in L2. In such a class, it is likely that the teacher and the student are doing baby talk all the time, which may prove to be quite demotivating.

To sum up, motivation is both resultant and perhaps casual and in order to keep the learner's motivation in an ideal circle, proper use of L1 in the classroom is useful, especially for beginners. As the learner's knowledge and capability of L2 increases, it is necessary to lessen the use of L1 to enhance his/her motivation.

B. Psychological Basis for the Use of L1 in the L2 Classroom.

Motivation has a direct influence on the "psychological pressure" students are ready to bear in the learning process: are they willing to feel unable to express their ideas for months? What "psychological price "are they prepared to pay? We know that for some any price, but others will cry out for help in their mother tongue.

There are psychological advantages of an adequate use of L1,just as much as the learner needs, on the right occasions, and for the right levels for both the teacher and the learner.

1. For the teacher:
   a. He/she may find it more natural to give counselling in his/her mother tongue.
   b. If he/she is unable to explain or say somehting in English,he/she will feel better if he/she does so in L1 rather than ignore the problem.
2. For the learner:
   a. The use of L1 provides relaxation from using L2 all the time.

b. It soothes anxiety at moments of emotional tension such as first contact with English (beginners), expression of problems encountered in the learning process (beginners, elementary, intermediate), asking for counselling (even advanced students if they wish to do so), examination (asking for clarification of tasks to be done (beginners mainly), and as a better alternative than remaining silent (the learner knows that at least he/she will get some feedback this way).

Age is another factor worth pointing out. Old, slow students, especially those learning a second language for the first time, need extra psychological support and counselling and need to get it in their own language. We do not feel entitled to ignore this need or "tell them off" every time they speak Arabic in the classroom.

To sum up, maxims such as "only L2 should be used in the classroom"or, "L1 should not be allowed in the classroom" are not, in our view, psychologically healthy for the teacher or the learner. They are most unrealistic in the context of countries in which English is taught and used as a foreign language as is the case in all Arab countries where most of the teachers of English, whether they admit it or not, use Arabic.

C. The Influence of L1 on Second Language Acquisition:

Two concepts commonly held in the past have been seriously questioned. One is that difficulties in attaining L2 proficiency lie inthe interference of L1. Research has proved this to be questionable as Dulay (1982: 102) states:

"The incidence of errors that are traceable to characteristics in the first language is relatively low-around 4% to 12% for children, and from 8% to 23% for adults."

Besides, transfer from L1 which was viewed negatively in the past as automatic reflex of the learner has come to be viewed in a new light in recent second language acquisition research. Transfer is a complex process that is affected by several factors such as transferability and language distance (cf.

Jordans,1977, Kellerman, 1978, and Kellerman, 1995). Transfer as such involves both the behavioral aspect and the cognitive aspect of the learner.The other conception which has been challenged is that what causes the greatest trouble are the differences between L1 and L2. Recent research tends to point to such a conclusion that L1-L2 differences do no necessarily mean difficulty in second language acquisition. On the contrary, problems often come from the similarities between L1 and L2 (Larson, 1991: 106).

Perhaps these two misconceptions stemmed from the hypotheses of what Corder in Ellis (1985:154) refers to as "restructuring continuum", which views the SLA process as "gradually replacing features of his mother tongue as he acquires features of the target language". (Ellis, 1985:54).

An alternative to this is the "recreation continuum" which views SLA as" slowly creating the rule systerm of L2 in a manner very similar to the child's acquisition of his first language". (Ellis, 1985:54). Our understanding is that the above quotations do not mean that L1 has no influence on SLA at all, but that L1 is no longer looked upon as the sole base and starting point of SLA. The knowledge a learner can utilize in learning L2 falls into four categories:

1. Properties shared by all languages, e.g. vowels and consonants tend to alternate in a syllable.
2. knowledge of L1.
3. knowledge of L2 which the learner has or is supposed to have.
4. non-linguistic knowledge, e.g. cultural and social knowledge (Klein, 1986: 63).

When an error occurs, it might be due to the interference of L1, but it could also be because the feature of L2 is outside the language universals, or the learner has a misunderstanding of it, or he lacks necessary non-linguistic knowledge. Anyway, we should not put all the blame on L1. We cannot keep L1 out of the door of the classroom. In a beginners' class, the teacher teaches in English, but the students learn, at least partly in Arabic. Now that we cannot

avoid Arabic in the learner's learning process, why should we not bring it to the surface and make use of it? Of course, when a teacher uses L1 in the classroom, he/she must be very careful. Too much comparison may encourage the students to transplant the features of L1 to L2.When to use L1 and whether to use a word, a phrase, or a sentence depends on contents, students' level, the classroom context, and materials and facilities the teacher has at hand.

IV. Teachers' Views on Using Arabic in ELT

This final section presents the views of teachers of English concerning the use of Arabilc in English language teaching. Tushyeh (1990) carried out an extensive field study, the first of its kind, on the English language teaching situation in the West Bank. He developed and distributed two questionnaires that dealt in detail with the various aspects of the English teaching situation in the West Bank. The first questionnaire was the School Teachers' Questionnaire. Two-hundred and thirty-one English language teachers from Government schools, private schools, and UNRWA schools responded to this questionnaire. The second questionnaire was the University Faculty Questionnaire. Thirty-nine Englsih language instructors from all six West Bank universities responded to this questionnaire. One item in both questionnaires dealt specifically with the use of Arabic in English language teaching at schools and universities in the West Bank.

Although the school teachers of English encouraged their students to use English in class, the majority of them indicated that they use Arabic in teaching English. As for university instructors of English the results indicated that 2.5% of the instructors always use Arabic in ELT, 64% use Arabic sometimes, 5% rarely use it, and 25.5% never use Arabic in ELT Arabic is not generally used in teaching English at the university level in the West Bank. Only 12.8% of the respondents use Arabic then only for contrastive purposes. This is in general in agreement with the tenets of the communicative approach which permits the

use of the native language in a limited way in order to avoid unnecessary verbiage and unclear circumlocution.

V. Conclusion:

The use of the learner's native language or L1 has been a hotly debated issue in the literature of second/foreign language teaching. The context of language learning should be viewed holistically. In the Arab world, it is almost impossible to banish the learner's first language, Arabic, when teaching Englilsh as a foreign language. Psychological and motivational factors allow for a judicious use of L1 in L2 teaching. Since the learner is the center of the learning process, language teaching practitioners should heed what the learner needs. Our long experience in teaching English in the Arab world indicates that Arab learners ask for help by a recourse to Arabic. With the advent of the communicative approach in language teaching which gives allowance for the use of L1 in certain situations and contexts, we believe that the taboo against the use of L1 in L2 and the rigid dogma of certain language teaching methods should be eased.

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